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Healthy Community Engagement

This guide is for local governments of rural and urban communities across British Columbia who want to receive community input in a way that is authentic and meaningful.

What you'll find in this Action Guide:

- **Actions and examples from Canadian communities**
- **Further reading and resources**
- **A glossary of terms**
- **A summary checklist to support authentic engagement**

Healthy People Healthy Society Healthy Environments

Local Government Action Guides for Healthy Communities

Healthy Community Engagement in BC

Community engagement is a process, not a project. It's about inviting community members into the decision-making process to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate solutions to issues that affect their daily lives and environments. As such, community engagement centres around trust, communication and collaboration. Community participation should focus on—and result from—the needs, expectations and desires of community members.[1]

Though the *Local Government Act* mandates public hearing processes and other 'appropriate consultation' when developing or adopting certain strategies, plans and bylaws, there is a growing expectation among community members that they will be invited to provide more meaningful input into the decisions that affect them—and an expectation that the input they provide will meaningfully impact the final decision.

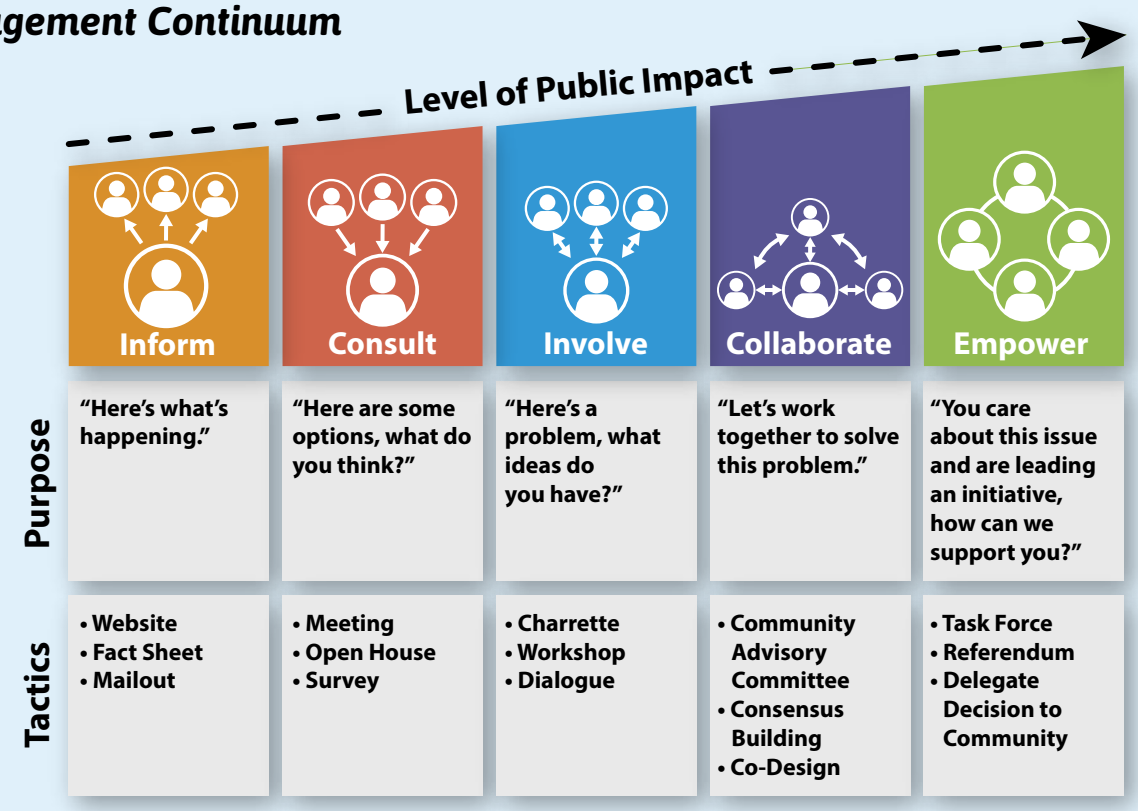
This document is not a primer on how to do community engagement—a number of excellent resources on this topic from other organizations already exist (recommended resources are listed in the Resources box on page 9). Instead, this document seeks to help local governments apply an equity lens to the community engagement efforts they are already mandated to do. Our aim is to support local governments as they work to ensure engagement is authentic and meaningful, rather than just another box to tick in a process.

How can community engagement improve the health and well-being of British Columbians?

By giving community members greater opportunity to determine the circumstances of their daily lives, community engagement can enhance the health and well-being of British Columbians.[2,3,4] Research also demonstrates that community engagement

Community Engagement Continuum

This graphic demonstrates the spectrum of public participation. Tactics on the left give the public the least amount of input into decision-making. As you move to the right, decision-making power becomes more balanced between the public and government, leaving citizens feeling more empowered, with more of a sense of ownership over the decisions made. Please note that the tactics listed are just examples, not an exhaustive list.

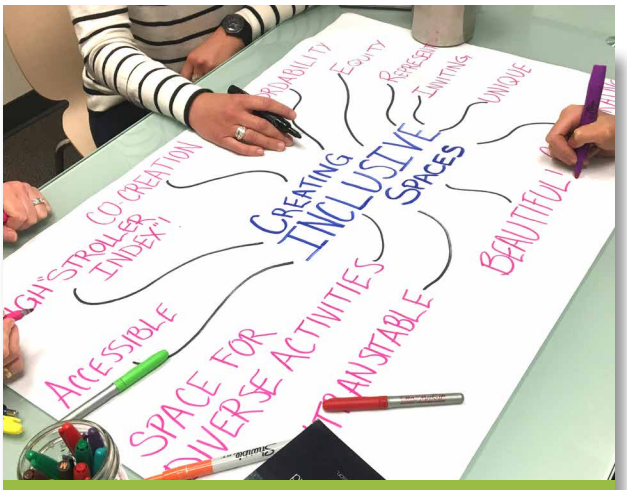


Adapted from the IAP2 spectrum of public participation

> **Community engagement is a process through which community members are empowered to own the change they want to see and involves communication, problem-solving, governance, and decision-making skills and strategies.** [10]

can contribute to improved health outcomes and strengthened community identity.[5] Meaningful community engagement processes build trust within the community, while ensuring well-rounded decision-making and more equitable service delivery.[6]

Community engagement can also improve health and well-being in communities by helping local governments make the best-informed decisions possible. Community members know what it's like to live in their community. They are experts in the challenges they face each day and in what kind of changes could make a fundamental difference to their lives. Authentic community engagement is also a powerful tool for discovering and cultivating strengths within communities—strengths that can then be used to support local governments as they work to solve societal challenges.[7] Developing collaborative relationships between local government and members of the community can allow for authentic power and resource sharing, making the community a better place for all.[8]



In a 2015 Real Estate Foundation of BC survey, 51% of respondents said they felt local citizens have too little influence in the decision making process for the planning and designing of the built environment in their community.[11]

Building equity into the community engagement process

Equity is the fair distribution of opportunities, power and resources to meet the needs of all people, regardless of age, ability, gender, or background. An equitable engagement process meets people where they are, considering the unique needs of each population group and ensuring everyone benefits from the decision that is ultimately made.[9] Healthy engagement means carefully considering how systemic barriers may affect peoples' ability to participate in public engagement processes, particularly those faced by Indigenous peoples, newcomers, youth, older adults and people with diverse abilities.

To ensure that more of these members of your community can participate in the community engagement process, it's important to design engagement opportunities to be:

Inclusive – Actively including people who are usually excluded or at risk of being excluded

Safe – Ensuring no social, emotional or financial repercussions result from participation

Culturally appropriate – Considerate and accommodating to cultural differences that may impact a person's abilities or preferences when it comes to participating

When local government representatives invite the community to play a meaningful role in the decision-making process, they empower community members to play an active role in shaping their community. Meaningful community engagement facilitates communication between community groups, businesses, and service providers, strengthening community cohesion. When community members are genuinely and actively involved in design, governance, and implementation, the resulting policies, programs, and services are more likely to be not just equitable, but also effective and sustainable.

Actions Local Governments Can Take

Creating a Healthy Community Engagement Process

A healthy community engagement process goes beyond the traditional public hearings and consultation measures. Healthy community engagement treats public input as an integral part of the decision-making process, rather than an add-on. When community engagement is recognized as a key part of the decision-making process, the decisions, plans, and developments are more likely to reflect the views of the wider community.

The first step in any community engagement process is to clarify exactly what the decision is that needs to be made. This is followed by an examination of who may potentially be impacted by that decision. In a healthy community engagement process, the next step is to undertake a searching and exhaustive examination of who may be excluded from participation in the process, either purposefully, or due to systemic barriers inherent in your community's current engagement processes. A healthy community engagement process understands and respects the diversity of the community, incorporating engagement methods that allow for the widest possible reach and inclusion of all community members, especially those who are typically harder-to-reach or under-served in the community. When choosing engagement methods, dimensions of diversity that should be considered include economic and social status, gender, ethnicity, education level, literacy and mobility, among other characteristics.[12] Furthermore, a healthy engagement process considers community members to be partners; a relationship built on trust, open communication, and respect must be fostered in order for input to be honest and meaningful.

It is important to ensure that community members are made aware of exactly what they are being engaged about, and what aspect of their expertise as a community member is needed. For example, some community members may not know the exact costs, benefits, and technical details associated with where to put a bike lane—as an engineer or planner would—but they do know the areas they frequent most and what would encourage them to choose active transportation modes over an automobile. Being specific from the outset about what kind of input is useful will help ensure that everyone's time is respected and the process is positive for all involved.

Legislation in British Columbia mandates that local governments must provide opportunities for the public to share their views,[13,14] yet many questions can arise through the engagement process:

- How can we effectively convey planning principles, concepts and information in a way that is enjoyable and accessible for the public to engage with?
- How can we reach and meaningfully engage a range of population groups to gather feedback and ideas?
- How can we be transparent in how we incorporate public input into decisions?

The following sections provide actions that local governments can take to ensure an equitable, and meaningful healthy community engagement process. A healthy community engagement process that seeks to include a diverse range of perspectives can help local governments to develop stronger policies and make decisions that better represent the community as a whole, while also improving community health and well-being.

Applying an Equity Lens

Equity is the fair distribution of opportunities, power and resources to meet the needs of all people, regardless of age, ability, gender, or background.

Applying an equity lens means asking who will benefit from a policy, program, initiative or service, but also who may be excluded from those benefits and why. How might some population groups be unfairly burdened today or in the future?

Tools and resources available to help apply an equity lens to planning work include:

- Advancing Equity and Inclusion: A Guide for Municipalities[29]
- Health Equity and Community Design: What is the Canadian Evidence Saying?[30]
- Health Equity Guide: A Human Impact Partners Project[31]

Actions Local Governments Can Take

Actions

Understand what 'engagement' means to community members. Though many engagement efforts go beyond the legislated requirements, community engagement can often feel like just another step to get through. Healthy community planning and decision-making encourages consistent and active engagement with all sectors of the community. Community perceptions of what it means to be engaged and the ways in which they would like to participate may differ from what local governments expect from the engagement process. Foster a positive relationship with the community and work to build trust and honest two-way dialogue. Be clear about exactly what is being asked of the community when engaging them.

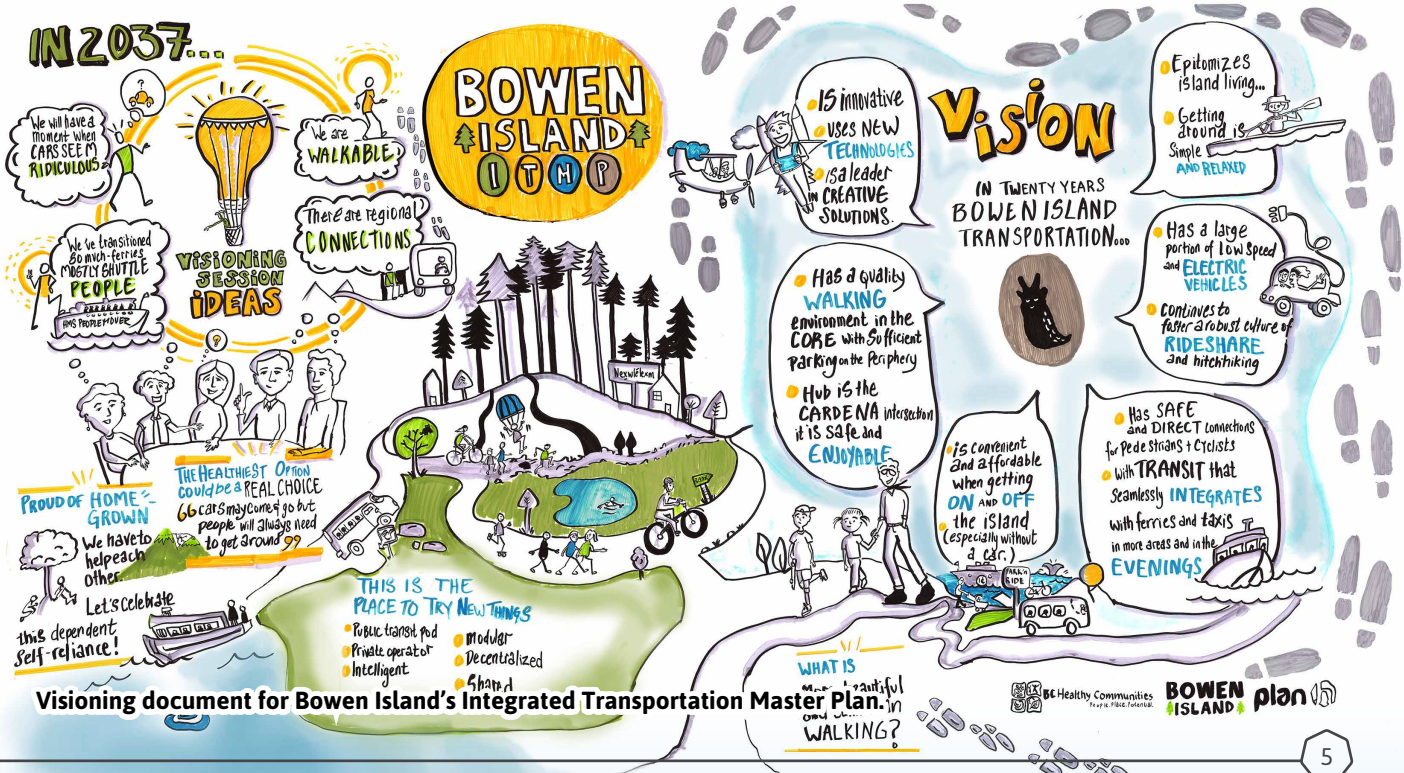
Example:

In 2016 and 2017, the Municipality of Bowen Island led a multi-sectoral, collaborative engagement process to develop an active transportation network and reduce community reliance on cars. The result is the Bowen Island Transportation Plan[15], a 20-year vision that will guide the municipality in all of its transportation decisions. The municipality also hired a graphic facilitator to help visually showcase their vision of Bowen Island's Integrated Transportation Master Plan.

Legend

- Rural/small town
- Urban/mid-sized community
- International

Use an equity lens throughout the creation and implementation of engagement processes to ensure that a broad range of voices are able to be heard. Equity requires that we understand not everyone in the community is in the same place, and some people will require more or less support and resources than others.[16] The goal of an equitable engagement process is to level the playing field and ensure authentic and empowered participation. Think about your current engagement process and who currently participates in engagement efforts—is this representative of the diversity in the community? Are there voices missing? Community members can bring their lived experience to illustrate both the benefits and challenges of living in the community. Community engagement efforts should work to eliminate barriers to participation and ensure that the feedback being gathered is representative of the wider community.



Visioning document for Bowen Island's Integrated Transportation Master Plan.

Actions Local Governments Can Take

Examples:

The City of Portland, Oregon recognizes equity and inclusion as a key principle of the city's public involvement processes.[17]

For several years, the City of Vernon, together with a number of community partners, has been exploring ways in which Vernon can better support children, youth and families to build a strong, healthy future and support community economic development. To do this, the city invited groups of local youth to take part in the planning process, and put greater emphasis on youth opinions and ideas than they did for responses from adults in the community. The result is the Youthful Vernon Strategy, a plan that outlines 44 key actions for Vernon to become a 'youth friendly city'.

The Strathcona Community Health Network hired Urban Matters and BC Healthy Communities to complete an assessment of housing needs in the Strathcona region of Vancouver Island. The extensive engagement process with local community members included a wide variety of engagement techniques, each designed to gather a unique type of information from residents. The ideas and perspectives gathered from interviews were prioritized, because they captured information from groups in the community whose voices are heard less often. Through interviews and informal discussions, community members had the opportunity to share their own personal challenges with finding and keeping housing.

Partner with other local governments, organizations and community groups who can support your local government in reaching more community members. Community partners can support your government's goals while contributing their own contacts, skills and assets, allowing your government to broaden its impact and access hard-to-reach groups so they can provide input.[18]

Examples:

The Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Trust began planning for their 2016 Vital Signs survey by convening leaders from the District of Tofino, District of Ucluelet, Yuułu?ił?ath Government and Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation.[19] Everyone immediately saw the value of working collaboratively across communities to gather reliable regional data that would provide a picture of the region's health and a tool for decision-making.

Did You Know?

In the Canadian context, the term Indigenous peoples refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit.[32] While some First Nations people live on-reserve, more than 70% of British Columbia's overall Indigenous population live 'off-reserve' in urban and rural communities throughout BC. Indigenous peoples are diverse, with different groups holding distinct histories, worldviews, languages, traditions, governance structures and processes. Through acknowledgment of First Nations rights and title and respect for Indigenous communities, we can work together and partner in the development of strategies, policies and programs that meet the needs of our communities.

- To learn more about First Nations in BC visit the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations: http://bcafn.ca/
- To learn more about Métis-specific history, culture and traditions visit Métis Nation British Columbia: https://www.mnbc.ca/
- To learn more about Inuit history, culture and traditions visit Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami: https://www.itk.ca/

Actions Local Governments Can Take

Use the principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) to ensure First Nations peoples control the way data is collected, managed, used, and shared in their communities.

Example:

Islands Trust has developed their own set of engagement principles for engaging with Indigenous communities.[20] Principles include a commitment to learning more about Indigenous culture and history, as well as a commitment to reconciliation.

Use a variety of engagement methods to widen your reach and connect with community members in ways that are comfortable for them. Not all community members have the time or the ability to attend community council meetings, public hearings, or open houses. Build trust with the community and choose tactics that are intentional and appropriate.[21]

Using a variety of engagement techniques also allows you to meet the various learning needs and styles of your audience. People are drawn to videos, props and imagery because they can be easier and faster to understand, and more detail can be provided through written word or audio. Determine which delivery method best suits the content and the audience, and try to build in a variety of approaches.

Example:

During the joint economic development strategy between the 'Namgis First Nation and the Village of Alert Bay, engagement took on many forms, using audience response technologies through polls and surveys, as well as business walks, workshops, poster competitions with local schools, and even community mapping. The engagement saw unprecedented levels of participation, with 35% of the Island's population providing input into the plan. [22]

Example:

Following three months of budget workshops and talks, the District of Squamish hosted a Budget Open Mic community event to facilitate candid discussions on how the proposed 2018 municipal budget would be allocated.[23] To help those who couldn't attend, the District live-streamed the event to their social media channels and took questions submitted via email, Facebook and Twitter. They also hosted

Ways to Connect

Art and creativity can be a great way to encourage participation and generate interest and ideas. Consider photography using recyclable point-and-shoot cameras to get people of all ages to capture their likes and dislikes in the community. Invite community members to submit a song, poem or art piece (with a prize incentive) that describes their neighbourhood and any ideas they may have.

Community mapping is a useful tool to identify neighbourhood assets, but can also be used to help people to illustrate what they like or dislike about an area and point out any improvements they'd like to see.

Street stalls can help to capture the views and comments of a large number of community members. They can consist of outdoor displays such as graffiti walls, maps or idea walls, allowing people passing by to comment on a particular issue or vote on a particular idea.

Community surveys are a standard way local governments consult with the community. Take this one step further and provide respondents with a summary report of survey findings, which can help people feel more engaged in the process. Make sure the survey introduction explains how the results will be used, and how community members can stay informed.

Online engagement through social media or discussion forums and blogs can be a useful tool, allowing people to choose where, when, and how they want to participate in an engagement opportunity. It may, however, exclude those without regular access to the internet and therefore may be more beneficial when used in conjunction with other engagement techniques.

Actions Local Governments Can Take

several council workshops, a community survey, and created an interactive online tool[24] along with budget displays at District facilities.

Reduce barriers to participating in engagement opportunities by offering incentives like food, childcare and transportation for engagement event attendees. Provide honorariums to compensate participants for their time and expertise. Hold meetings and events at a variety of locations and at different times of the day.

Examples:

In 2013 the District of North Vancouver, Vancouver Coastal Health and the Heart and Stroke Foundation partnered to host the Edgemont Village Roll and Stroll event in celebration of active living. Families were invited to experience the walkability of their neighbourhood, participate in child-friendly activities, take part in interactive exhibits and win prizes.

At the outset of the ourQuesnel! Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, city staff developed a communications plan to guide the engagement process.[25] The plan included promoting ourQuesnel! through print, radio, television and web-based media channels, encouraging in-person participation of at least 50 people at each public outreach event, generating a minimum of 100 responses to online surveys and ensuring community input was fully addressed throughout the process.[26]

Make your communications meaningful and understandable to all residents. Define your target audience, understanding their background, culture, health status, literacy level and other pertinent factors, and use that knowledge to craft clear, relevant messages. Tell a story or provide pictures so people can easily understand the issue and apply it to their own lives. Ensure language is accessible and understandable by a range of literacy levels.

What is participatory budgeting?

Participatory budgeting enables communities to decide how public funds are spent. Community members deliberate amongst themselves, and sometimes with government officials, ultimately deciding how to allocate funds for public goods. This process has been increasingly implemented across the UK, Europe and worldwide, and is endorsed as good practice by institutions including the World Bank and the United Nations. International research suggests that participatory budgeting can help build community connections and improve health among some population groups.[33]

Photo credit: City of Victoria

Example of participatory budgeting:

In 2017, the City of Victoria empowered the community to decide how to spend a portion of the City budget. The process included introductory training for community members and City staff on participatory budgeting, selection of a steering committee to design the process, and community voting to determine how $50,000 of City funds would be spent. Three community-based projects were selected to receive funding out of 28 proposals submitted.

Actions Local Governments Can Take

Example:

The City of Vancouver's consultation plan for the Joyce-Collingwood Precinct Plan involved participation in community festivals, using hand-delivered printed material in several languages.[27]

Meet people where they are, rather than expecting them to come to you. Looking to engage with transit users? Ride the bus. Want to engage with families? Go to a youth soccer game. If you are unsure about how to approach a particular group, connect with local organizations or community groups that work with these populations and follow their advice.

Example:

During the engagement process for their 2040 Transportation Strategy in 2012, the City of Vancouver took over Robson Square to engage passerby. By using approaches such as 'dot-mocracy' voting, mapping, and sticky notes, they collected feedback from a large number of people they may not have otherwise reached.

The Township of Langley developed an extensive public engagement program to broaden and diversify community participation in the development of their new Social Sustainability Strategy. The engagement activities in Phases 1 and 2 of the project involved a variety of formats, were held in different areas of the Township, and targeted sub-populations that are often underrepresented in engagement processes.

Evaluate and monitor the engagement process at every step of the project. Evaluation throughout the project will help you to improve and modify your approach to community engagement activities, celebrate success and learn from past experiences.

Example:

The Sunshine Coast Council in Queensland, Australia developed a community engagement framework that includes an eight-step process for evaluating community engagement efforts.[28]

Resources

Community engagement and communication: the health planner's toolkit (http://www.ontla.on.ca/library/repository/mon/15000/268203.pdf)

Community engagement guide and tools (https://douglas.qld.gov.au/download/community_engagement/Community%20Engagement%20Guide%20and%20Tools.pdf)

Community engagement toolkit (http://www.sparc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/community-engagement-toolkit.pdf)

Community planning toolkit—community engagement (https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/community-planning-toolkitf)

Equity and inclusion lens handbook (https://www.cawi-ivtf.org/publication/equity-and-inclusion-lens-handbook-2018/)

Index of community engagement techniques (https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/316071/Resources/Tools/Index%20of%20Engagement%20Techniques.pdf)

Public participation spectrum (https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/spectrum_8.5x11_print.pdf

Seniors engagement toolkit (SET) (https://www.newwestcity.ca/database/files/library/SET_Final_Report_May_2_2011.pdf)

Youth engagement toolkit resource guide (https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/data-monitoring-quality-assurance/information-for-service-providers/youth_engagement_toolkit_resource_guide.pdf)

Index of community engagement techniques (http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/index-of-community-engagement-techniques)

Community Engagement in Local Communities: Hering hte Voices of the Public (https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/AUMA-UP42-ResPapr-CommEngageLocalComm.Jones_.Oct11.pdf

Glossary

Charrette: A community planning tool that allows diverse groups of participants to explore, understand and create possible and preferred options. Charrettes give visual form to ideas and encourage creative and innovative design solutions to difficult problems in a short period of time.

Community Engagement: A process through which community members are empowered to own the change they want to see and involves communication, problem solving, governance and decision-making skills and strategies.[34]

Diversity: Engaging people with different backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, recognizing the differences as assets to learning and innovation.[35]

Equity: Recognizing that not everyone starts at the same place, so some people will need different resources or support to achieve the same outcome. The goal is to eliminate disparities and level the playing field.[36]

Health Outcomes: A change in the health of an individual, or a group of people or population, which is wholly or partially attributable to an intervention or series of interventions. For example, if a municipal government decided to remove a sidewalk in order to widen a roadway to reduce traffic congestion, this action may improve traffic flow and commute times by car, but it would also affect health outcomes for the people who used that sidewalk as a way to stay active and safe from passing cars.[37]

Healthy Communities Approach: This approach fosters health and equity in communities.[38] It addresses multiple determinants of health (social, economic, environmental, physical) using five strategies to improve community health and well-being: community engagement; multi-sectoral collaboration; political commitment; healthy public policy; and asset-based community development.

Inclusivity: Authentic and empowered participation, a true sense of belonging.[39]

Sense of Community: A feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through commitment to be together. Sense of community has four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.[40]

Checklist

The following checklist can help assess the ways in which local governments engage community members in the development of policies, programs or services. How many boxes can be checked off for your community?

Does your local government:

- ☐ Identify community engagement as a priority in community plans or strategies?
- ☐ Consider diverse community members when planning engagement activities?
- ☐ Consider how all policies, plans or initiatives, not just those specific to community engagement, could support or hinder health equity?
- ☐ Partner with other local governments, organizations and community groups to support community-led engagement?
- ☐ Consider the barriers to community engagement and work to remove them?
- ☐ Tailor engagement strategies to specific community audiences?
- ☐ Use a variety of engagement techniques?
- ☐ Consider use of plain language for any form of engagement developed?
- ☐ Have a clearly defined engagement process so community members know what to expect from the engagement process?

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More Information

Want support or to learn more about improving health and well-being in your community?

Health authorities can support local governments by providing advice and expertise, resources for local government staff and elected officials to develop healthy public policy, providing community health profiles, and opportunities and partnerships to work together on joint healthy living actions. You may already have relationships with your health authority. If not, up-to-date contact information for your local health authority lead is available at https://bchealthycommunities.ca/index.php/planh-overview/.

Acknowledgments

PlanH is a partnership between BC Healthy Communities Society and the British Columbia Ministry of Health.

PlanH creates healthier communities by supporting partnerships across sectors, providing learning opportunities, resources, and consultation, and facilitating leading-edge practices and collaborative local action.

This guide was produced by BC Healthy Communities Society. The authors acknowledge the contributions of the British Columbia Ministry of Health, Fraser Health, Interior Health, Northern Health, Vancouver Coastal Health, Island Health, the Provincial Health Services Authority, the First Nations Health Authority, the Union of BC Municipalities, and all who provided input into the content of this guide.

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